TJC Touchstone
1999

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Solace *by Dan C. Guy*

Foreword

Artists, photographers and writers, writers, writers — simply ordinary people doing ordinary things for all to see. By submitting their work, all have become vulnerable, throwing caution to the wind by expressing parts of themselves, perhaps for the first time.

Most likely many of the contributors to the 1999 TJC Touchstone are marshmallows or nuts. Marshmallows are students and instructors known by their walk and talk. They are what they appear, believe what they say and it is evident in their writings, their art, their photographs.

The nuts are more difficult to know. So often they guard their inner feelings with a shell, sometimes a hard shell protecting deep-seeded beliefs they want to keep inside. On the other hand, some use a translucent covering that acts like a shell, but only offers an occasional, brief glimpse inside, seldom really opening wide the curtain for others to see the whole show.

So we wave high the flag of appreciation to the marshmallows and nuts for all their contributions. Without them, Touchstone would have been a bare page indeed, instead of this smorgasbord of artistic talent, thought-provoking works and just plain enjoyment for us all.

Warren Powell, editor in chief
TJC Touchstone 1999

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About the title:

A distinctive streak left on a black touchstone when rubbed with a genuine silver or gold was a foolproof test which allowed ancient civilizations to trust using coins for trade. We trust that you, too, will find genuine distinctive elements of value in the TJC Touchstone.

Carolyn Hendon
1986

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Music, Sweet Music

by

Tressie D. Seegers

What a wonderful idea God had when he decided to create music! He must have been looking around one day at all his wonderful creations and thought, "What will the birds sing? How will mothers lull their precious babies to sleep? How will the aching hearts be soothed when there are no words to be spoken? To what will the beautiful bride walk down the aisle? What is a special way can I speak to my children, and how can they sing my praises?" He then gave us sweet music. Music sings through our veins and makes a sad heart smile. Music keeps our fading memories alive and intertwined with our spirits, lifting them higher than the stars dance beyond the heavens.

Often times music can soothe a sad heart. It was late, and I was driving alone. My life at that time was in a state of turmoil. I felt darker than the blackness that lay beyond my headlights. The decisions that I had made in my life had pushed me into the throes of depression. As I drove in solitude along the lonely highway a song from the radio pierced my soul. "Keeper of the gates of wisdom, please let me in. I just can't go through another heartache again," Someone else on this earth felt the same pain that wrenched my gut. Somehow, I felt a little better and not so alone anymore. I was justified in my feelings, and the load I was carrying suddenly got lighter. Someone else singing of his pain helped me realize that I would get through this terrible time.

Music can magically mend hard feelings and make anger vaporize. Getting two elementary-age girls ready for school in the morning is often a challenging and frustrating job. One morning while trying to complete this task peacefully, procrastination reared its ugly head. The morning did not end without tempers flailing, clothes flying and brushes slamming. The ride to school was as silent as a leaf falling from a tree on a crisp fall morning. The air in the car was thick with anger, resentment and regret for harsh words yelled earlier that morning. As we all sat in silence, I reached over and turned on the radio. The music filled the air, and I felt peace and forgiveness glide across our hearts. Smiles suddenly replaced tears, and all was forgiven without a single word being spoken. Somehow music made everything better.

Music is the way our memories sing to us across time. Recently my daughter received a new compact disc for her birthday. I was excited because I knew the artist had done a remake of my favorite song when I was eight years old. I was like a child waiting for a piece of candy when she took the plastic wrap off. I couldn't wait to hear this old song again for the first time in 21years.

I used to have every word memorized, and I was sure the words would come flooding back again as soon as I heard that sweet melody again. I put the CD in her stereo and turned up the volume as loud as it would go. After an eternity, the music came bolting out of the speakers like thunder filling the room. "I got a brand new pair of roller skates, you got a brand new key."

As I closed my eyes, I was eight years old again, lying on our brown carpet listening to my most treasured 45 rpm record of "Brand New Key." Our memories may fade as we get older, and some may even be forgotten, but like a lighted match being tossed into our soul,the song will always remember when.

Life is a journey on which we run, walk and sometimes crawl. Music enhances our journey, urging us to jump, skip and sometimes dance. God knew we would have trouble to go through during our journey, so he gave us music to help us see through, guide us and comfort our hearts.

The next time life has got you down and

you cannot find comfort in the words of others, try music. There is no better therapy than being home alone, lying on your floor with your eyes shut, listening to your favorite song. The music will enrapture your soul, and you will feel your spirit dance in the air like steam above a hot cup of coffee on a cold December morning.

After a couple of hours this convenient and very cost effective therapy, you will be surprised at how much better you will feel and how your problems will not seem so monumental after all. Yes, God knew what he was doing when He gave us music. Thank you, Lord, for this blessed gift!

Memories

by

Warren A. Powell

A pile of leaves,
A lunchroom smell,
My most favorite shoes,
An old football yell.

A joke I'd heard,
But couldn't bear to tell
Remembering I hurt my knee,
The many times I fell.

Bubble gum sticking to my face,
My own secret "be alone" place.
Drinking water as cold as ice,
And, last, a friend who was especially nice.

The Real Saving Place

by

Catherine L. Starkey

I really should keep this;
Can't throw it away,
For as sure as the taxman,
I'll need it the next day.

I also should paint this
And varnish that, too.
And I know this commode
Could be sanded like new.

But this work is so messy
and takes so much space,
Till I get the time,
I'll find some other place.

I'll pack it and stack it
Right next to my brother's
In the garage or the attic
Back home at our mother's.

Blue-Collar Blues

by

Charles L. Lowery

Presses pounding, pulse-resounding,
Trapped in measures too astounding

Gritty-clean and oily-mean
Rhythm drives this man-machine.

Shifters, lifters, hush of whispers,
Air-hiss song and bleeding blisters.

Midnight, daylight, dusk til dawn
Hydraulics sing and get it on.

Poetic sages, blues-man wages,
Tone-deaf jam on concrete stages;

Callous-hand, blue-collar band
Rocks the soul's supply-demand!

Square with the World

by

Judith Caswell

Last night about 11 o'clock, Neoma started hollering and moaning and holding her stomach. I knew Daddy would hear her, and he would be mad because he has to get up at 5 every morning. Neoma threw up all over the bedspread. Daddy, Mamma and Travis rushed in the room. Mamma yelled, "What's wrong with Neoma, Frances?"

"She's sick," I said. "We got into those bananas that Daddy bought yesterday from the peddler, and Neoma ate about five of them!"

"Oh, sugar!" said Daddy. Daddy has a temper, but he says it's not right to use bad words, so when he gets mad and wants to let it out, he says "sugar" because it's the sweetest word he can think of. Daddy was mad because we're not supposed to eat too much at one time. Neoma threw up three more times last night; Mamma gave her some paregoric. Neoma says she won't eat another banana for the rest of her life.

We moved into the schoolhouse this year. Last year, 1923, I went to school in this house and finished the sixth grade. Upstairs, the walls are scribbled all over with chalk. Someone drew a heart and put "John loves Mary" in it. Some kids just wrote their names. Some put arithmetic problems on the walls.

When Mamma heard that the schoolhouse was for sale, she said, "I know Woolsey will buy it. He'll think it's a bargain, and a Williams can never pass up a bargain. People will tell him he can't move it on our property, but he'll do it just to prove he can."

Mrs. Mallard was the one who told Mamma that Daddy bought the schoolhouse. Mamma says, "Never tell Lucy Mallard what you don't want all of Gary to know. Just make small talk around her."

"What's small talk, Mamma?" I asked.

"It's when you talk a lot, but you don't say anything that matters a hill of beans."

Everybody in Gary turned out the day Daddy moved the schoolhouse. He rigged up a horse team and pulled this huge house onto our property. Daddy can do anything he sets his mind to. He only went through third grade at school, but he built the sawmill. He donated the lumber for our First Baptist Church and even helped build it. And when he needs a new tool or part for the sawmill, he just invents it.

Sometimes Daddy tells us about his school days. Once when he was sitting in class, he saw a runaway team of horses. He jumped up and ran out into the road in front of those horses and stopped them He says he didn't think about the danger. Daddy has always been able to charm and train horses.

After we moved into the schoolhouse and were sitting in the front porch swing, Daddy said, "Frances, see how the sun shines six feet from the end of the front porch all the way down the porch. I set this house facing north and square with the world. It faces north because I want to face the cold northers head on. We can see the sun rise in the east from the kitchen window while we eat breakfast. We will do most of our sittin' and talkin' here on the south porch. The house will block those cold winter winds."

"When I say the house is square with the world, I don't mean the sun fallin' the same number of feet all the way down the porch. I mean it's best to be square with people too. That means being truthful and honest and treatin' everyone the same whether they're rich or poor. It means payin' your debts if you have any, but it's better not to have debts. If you can't pay for it, don't buy it. Make do or build it yourself."

After Daddy gets up at 5 and builds the fire in the fireplace, he sits down and reads his

Bible before he calls the rest of us to get up. He likes to see us reading, too. Every time a book peddler comes by, Daddy buys us books. He tells us education is important, and even though he just went through third grade, he wants Travis, Neoma, B.H. and me to go to college.

Daddy says a new college has started in Nacogdoches named Stephen F. Austin after the father of Texas. Nacogdoches is just 40 miles from Gary. Neoma and I cried when Travis said, "I'm tired of school. I'm an outdoor man. I want to hunt, fish, work in the sawmill. I'm never going to college!" Neoma and I begged Travis to go to college, but he wouldn't have any of it.

Daddy gets mad and says "sugar" every time he sees Travis smoking a cigarette. He says cigarettes are "stinking, nasty weeds," but Travis does a man's job at the mill, so he can't spank him for smoking. Daddy hates alcohol, too, but nobody drinks in our family.

Daddy buys all the land he can get. He lets men sharecrop the land because he spends all day at the sawmill. Last spring one sharecropper grew 100 acres of corn on Daddy's land. Daddy says, "Never sell land. It's your best natural resource, and God's not making any more of it." Daddy even owns the deed to the town square of Gary.

Once Daddy did sell some land when the town committee picked his acres on a hill for a cemetery. Daddy sold the land cheap, so the town gave him several burial plots. Every time someone didn't have enough money to pay for a burial plot, Daddy just gave him one.

Daddy takes us to the Shreveport fair every year. He looks at the latest sawmill machinery while we look at the crafts and ride the merry-go-round and Ferris wheel. He says candy and soda pop will rot our teeth, so he wants us to buy fruit. Only one time we bought some peanut candy at the fair. We were trying to eat it on the way home, and Neoma yelled, "This candy has worms!" Daddy just looked at us and shook his head.

One time a bunch of gypsies camped next to the Gary cemetery. They came in broken-down wagons pulled by mules and a few swaybacked horses. I saw one black-haired gypsy man playing a sad song on a fiddle. Mother says Gary merchants are afraid the gypsies will steal them blind.

One afternoon in town a gypsy woman and her boy walked toward me. The woman had long black hair. She wore dangling jewelry and a long red skirt. The barefoot boy had a dirty face and his britches were too small. His eyes got big when he saw the apple in my hand, and I gave it to him. He said, "Thank you" and took a big bite.

Last Christmas something strange happened. When we heard Daddy's car on Christmas Eve, Neoma and I ran out to welcome him. In the back of the car we saw our dolls and fruit that were supposed to be our Santa Claus. Daddy looked a little funny. He said, "You know what, girls? I saw Santa Claus in town, and he said he was runnin' late delivering his gifts, and he asked me if I would mind bringing your gifts, so he could save a little time."

When we were in bed that night, Neoma told me that Daddy was really Santa Claus. "Why would he tell us he met Santa in town?" I asked.

"Because he thinks that believing in Santa Claus makes us happy and keeps us children. But you have to grow up sometime, so you might as well forget about Santa Claus. There is no Santa Claus in a red suit!"

"What if I don't want to grow up?"

"You don't have a choice. You can't stay a kid forever."

Since Neoma is two years older than I am, I guess she's right, but I'd like to stay a kid a little longer. I used to always sleep with my doll. Now I forget where she is, and during the day I like to play with my little brother Ben instead of with my doll, and I pretend I'm Ben's real mother. Maybe that's part of the growing up that Neoma was talking about.

Winter

by

Ronald C. Husbands

Quiet falling flakes,
Exposed branches shivering,
Bare trees coated white.

Day and Night

by

Nekaya M. Nash

He has walked the sky.
His mate will light the night shift.
Weary sun at rest.

The Student Who Came Back

by

Mary B. Adams

Though my invalid aunt is ninety-three
And long ago taught her class,
She wonders about her students,
The ones who did fail and pass.
She wonders if they are well,
And if they remember her
To the students she gave her life;
Does that fact to them occur?

One day as she was quilting,
The door did open wide.
And, there stood a long-lost student
Who wasn't casting her aside.
My aunt's face lighted up
As closer the "student" drew;
It had been sixty years,
But my aunt called out the name she knew.

"I'm so very glad you came,"
My aunt said through a tear.
"I've wondered about you often,
And about the others I hold dear.
Through the years we've been apart,
And somehow we've lost track.
But I'll thank God for this day,
And for the student who came back."

Jewel by Crystal A. Smith

The Magic of the Story

by

Roxana C. Sanders

Once upon a time, there lived a Storywriter who believed in magic. This Storywriter was very popular because of his tremendously written stories. Many of the townspeople, however, thought of the Storywriter as a foolish and extravagant liar. The Storywriter believed his stories held a special magic that could allow the reader to see the story come to life before them. Indeed, the townspeople believed his words held magic, but nowhere near the way the Storywriter claimed.

"My words come to life I tell you! Can you not see them dancing on the pages before you?! Are you blind to the magic?" the Storywriter would ask the crowds. They would only laugh and hiss at his foolishness.

One beautiful spring day, the Storywriter heard an illness had fallen on the brow of a small village girl. Because he loved children, the Storywriter visited the child.

She was in great pain and the illness had drained her of the strength to cry. The Storywriter felt pain in his heart for the sick child and wanted so much to help ease her pain.

"Please write me a magical story. I remember the children spoke of your stories and how fun they are. Can you bring me such fun and magic?" the small girl asked. Her parents glared at the Storywriter from the doorway, their eyes begging him not to make any foolish promises.

"I will write a story just for you. It will help ease your pain and the magic within my story will bring back the smile to your saddened face." The Storywriter left the small cottage, avoiding the worried stares of the girl's parents. He knew he would have a tough job ahead, but he wanted to see this lovely child happy again.

As he walked to his tiny cottage in the woods he stopped to rest beneath a huge tree on a beautiful hilltop.

"Oh, how will I ever write this child a story of such magic? It seems only I can see my magic while others laugh at my work. I must not let that little girl down."

From above, a voice spoke to the Storywriter. Sitting on a branch he saw a beautiful eagle. Her plumes were white around her head and her feathers were fluffed at attention.

"You lack faith in yourself," the eagle said. "Your stories are full of magic. The magic lives within your heart. And it is there that you must search to find the sick child her story."

"But what if she cannot see the magic, just as the others who laugh at me and call me a fool?"

"I will help her see your magic by giving a little magic of my own," the eagle replied. From her feathered wings she plucked a single feather and dropped it to the Storywriter.

"This feather holds the magic of the Earth from which I came. The magic of the Wind upon which I glide. And the biggest magic of all, the magic of Spirit from which all can be made possible. Now from within this tree that shades you, you will find the bloodline of Nature which you can use as your ink. Together with these gifts from the magical Spirit World, the story from your heart will help the child see the magic in your story."

The eagle spread her massive, white-tipped wings and floated off above the timber to the sky.

The Storywriter collected the ink from within the tree's limbs, placing it in his waterskin after emptying the water onto the tree's base. He then headed home with feather and ink to begin his story.

The Storywriter did just as the eagle had

instructed. And just as he had done many times before, he wrote with his heart. The story came easily.

He wrote of a dolphin who swam free in the sea. He wrote of its adventures and of the deep blue ocean in which it lived and played, and he wrote it with the feather and the ink of the tree. It took him two days and two nights to complete his magical story.

Once finished, the Storywriter returned to the house of the sick little girl. Her parents frowned at him, but allowed him to enter because the child had asked for him every day since he promised a story.

The Storywriter looked at her frail sleeping face as he laid the story on her chest. Her eyes opened, and though they seemed dim and overcome with pain, he saw a small twinkle in them.

"You are here! I thought you forgot me. Did you write me a magical story?"

"Yes, dear, I sure did. I hope it brings joy to you." The Storywriter and the girl's parents sat silently as she opened the pages and began to read. Suddenly her eyes lit up and a smile spread across her face as she exploded with excitement.

"I can see it!! I can see him there!! Swimming and playing and jumping!! I can really hear his laughter!! Listen, come see him!!"

The Storywriter and the parents jumped to their feet to look into the book themselves. There within the book was the dolphin, jumping from page to page, splashing water about. The sea breeze blew cool and the taste of salt rested upon their lips. The dolphin's happy chatter was loud, and the crashing and splashing of waves echoed off the walls of the small cottage bedroom.

"It is magic!! It really is!!" the Storywriter yelled as he patted the little girl's head and shared in her delight. Her pain had obviously eased or had been temporarily forgotten, for now she sat upright in the bed, smiling and laughing as she watched the dolphin play before her.

Her parents stepped back in disbelief and horror. How could this be? How could this foolish Storywriter make their daughter feel such laughter and happiness at a time that had been filled with constant pain and misery? Once again they looked at the book the child held proudly before her and stared blindly at the empty, blank pages.

The Keys to the Garden of Eden *by Andrea L. Toler*

There Stands A Tree

by

Warren A. Powell

Early this morning, as dawn is shedding her light across the face of Tyler, I am sitting in my front yard, listening to my neighborhood awaken. Many birds are calling and whistling their good mornings to one another, each in their own beautiful way.

About 25 feet away stands an old, time-worn tree whose leaves months ago were swallowed by fall. Barely visible in the dim light, outlined against the sky, it is the perch for only one bird this morning, answering the call of another.

Fifteen minutes later the limbs, branches, bark are now visible, the bird continues to sing, yet I cannot see it. How wonderful the sound—like God himself is speaking to me. But where is the source of that great sound? Maybe the bird is so small that it's hidden behind a limb. I quietly get out of my chair, walking slowly to the other side of the tree. Still nothing.

The neighboring chorus is growing more numerous now. I stand facing only this one tree . . . my eyes strain to see, my ears waiting to hear the bird's response. I watch that area of the tree where I last heard the song. Still nothing but sky and wood—I see no living creature that sings.

That singular sound again. I can't be more than 10 feet away from it, but still cannot find the winged singer. Who is offering up that wonderful gift of God? From what limb, what branch, which twig?

All of a sudden, from within a very small crack or hole in one of the larger branches, a beak sticks out, outlined against the morning sky. Now a head. Now a song! Oh great soloist, sing, sing, sing. Hidden in a scarred, dead part of the tree, you were there all the time. How was I to know what was inside?

Why did I look for you only where I expected to find you? Woodpecker, swallow, your name and looks make no difference. It's your song that blesses me this day. Even when all the limbs are bathed with a basket of rainbow colored leaves, that I had no reason to thank God for it.

How many times in my life have I made the same mistake, both with other trees, and more importantly, with people that I have met. Looking at the outside. Seeing holes in dead trees. Thinking I knew the right places to look, the right things to see. All the time, God was saying, "Warren, you are being blind to my beauty....deaf to my voice. I love and build on the inside of people. In hurt places. Inside both the beautiful and the ugly. Bringing light where there is darkness. Inside the heart."

Lord, teach me this day to open my eyes to your world.

The Merry Ferret

by

Linda S. Davis

The Three Stooges pale in comparison to the rollicking shenanigans of a ferret. This small ball of furry energy can mesmerize for hours with its playful antics, inquisitive explorations and blatant thievery.

Ferrets live to play. From digging the soft, moist earth from a favorite potted plant, to taking a long, leisurely nose-dive through a bowl of dry dog food, the ferret is a small, semi-soft bundle of energy. The soft tinkle of a small bell heralds the arrival of the small, raccoon-masked Tasmanian devil named Amber, the ferret. Sauntering down the hall with a waddling gait, her claws lightly click on the cool, hard floor. She stands poised, surveying her kingdom, quickly deciding what she wants to play with first.

Amber decides to try her artistic abilities at rearranging the house, starting with a large heavy container of drinking water for the dog. The container weighs about 10 pounds, but her weasel-like body expertly flexes and tightens, her taut muscles labor to push and pull the screeching container from one room to the next. Dripping with water, the ferret leaps in ecstasy at having accomplished such a glorious feat. Suddenly, in the blink of a cat's eye, Amber is running through the house, deftly avoiding glass objects and navigating sharp turns like an Indy race car driver. Sliding across a coffee table, her attention turns to a box of Kleenex.

This simple box holds as much excitement for her as a carnival funhouse. Swiftly she climbs onto the box edge, pulls out some Kleenex, and as neatly as a shredding machine, reduces it to small particles. Amber gracefully springs into the box, swimming through the puffs of tissue, sending pieces flying into the air where they lightly float to the floor.

I yell; she runs. Observing this sable-colored tornado run is like seeing a slinky toy go down a flight of stairs; her front half waits for her back half to catch up. With a cloudburst of energy, Amber is running and leaping with mouth open in wild and total abandonment. She springs straight up, wiggling, turning in mid-air, her slender, lithe body pirouetting as gracefully as a ballerina. This is her dance of joy, and I sense her exhilaration for life as she boundlessly dances across the living room floor.

Although ferrets have immense energy for play, they do slow down long enough for exploration. Where will Amber wander today? Into the deep, dark caverns under the living room chairs or the recesses of the soft bed blanket where she glides out of sight like a submarine. I feel tugging on my slacks, as I look down to see Amber scaling up my legs. Today she is climbing Mount Chair and cares not that I am sitting in her way. She sticks her long, pointed snout between the chair and the cushion, striving to wedge her flattened body into the space. The space will not open for her, so she turns her attention to my slacks pockets, but again there is no opening.

Slowly, she begins her trek up my shirt as we face each other nose to nose, eye to eye. Two small brown beady eyes search my face, and her brown, round nose quivers, taking in the human scents. Silver-gray teddy-bear-shaped ears move with every vibration as I fondle the semisoft glistening coat; a slight odor of musk wafts upward and assaults my nostril as the ferret closely examines my upper lip.

Moving to my shoulder, Amber decides to examine my "fur." Her nose roots through my hair as hard, dull claws lightly scrape the

surface of my scalp. The velvety bean-like pads rest on my shoulder once again as the ferret progresses to my ear for a closer look. The whispery warmth of erratic breathing is amplified as her cold wet nose nuzzles my ear lobe; long dark wiry whiskers stroke the side of my face. Gently she nibbles at the hanging flesh of my ear, delicately a silky pink tongue juts out and traces the outer ear rim as goosebumps crawl over my flesh and I shiver. As swiftly as this exploration began, it abruptly ends in a fearless leap from Mount Chair.

An old dirty sock crawls across the floor, meanders around, then slowly sinks beneath a chair. Ferrets are notorious thieves and will rob in full view. No object is safe from the swift, keen, probing eyes that wander around the room, searching for a target. A very worn, tattered, offensive-smelling shoe sits alone in the corner of the room, unaware it is being stalked. With the tinkle of a bell and a grand leap, the shoe is assaulted.

Giving up without a struggle, the poor, tired tennis shoe is ceremoniously paraded around and dragged to a secret destination under a chair. The entrance is too small to accommodate the new prize, but Amber is persistent in her tugging and shoving, to no avail. Frustrated, her long cylindrical tail bristles, resembling a bottlebrush. Hopping sideways, she chatters like a squirrel, and frantically whips her head from side to side. In retaliation for this temporary setback, a loud clatter of metallic keys echoes through the house. As if by magic, car keys vanish from a coffee table, only to reappear sauntering down the hall. Pens, pencils, jewelry, cordless telephones and large chunks of dry dog food are all fair game when it comes to lavishly lining a den.

Finally, the tinkling bell gradually recedes down the hallway, and quiet envelopes the house once again as the Energizer bunny prepares to take a nap. But I know it is only intermission in the ongoing merry ferret show.

Gift of Orchids by Amy S. Wright

Savoring the Moment

by

Deborah Spradlin

Some great grandmothers and a few supposed neonatal experts claim holding a newborn baby to much will make it "spoiled." To these folks I respectfully say, "Nonsense! Hogwash! This infant is not a piece of lunch meat, which turns bad so quickly. Babies need lots of holding, and maybe we all do." So, ignoring this piece of advice. I held a newborn last night, and none too hurriedly, either.

Not yet seven pounds at three weeks old, her warm, tiny body seems dwarfed by her cushioned carry seat. I adoringly study the familiar look of such tiny, yet perfectly formed ears, lips and toes, miniature models of adult ones, yet so much more cute when minute. The curled mini-fingers, with paper-thin nails, which I recall grow so quickly, grasp my giant finger as I touch it to her tightly closed fist.

I recognize the typical appearance of the newborn skin, common for so many. So velvety soft, yet marked with red blotches that seem to make camp for a day, moving to a new site tomorrow, as the body adjusts to the harshness of forces encountered outside the protective environment of the womb. As I marvel at her hair, so long and silky black, I wonder, "Will it turn blonde?...fall out?...remain the same?" So many possibilities, yet only God knows what's in store for little Madaleine.

When at last this most marvelous of his creations begins to stir and fret, my eager hands hurry to the task of lifting her out to care for and soothe. Content no longer with the gentle rocking and conversation I offered, she ravenously sucks the tiny nipple of her preemie bottle, seemingly unaware that the more accustomed nourishment from Mother is unavailable for now. When the last drop has drained, Madaleine shows her anger and disappointment in a loud but short-lived bleating meow. After the necessary burp, I arrange her fragile body to my chest, careful to keep her bobbling and unsteady head from thudding against the concrete of my shoulder.

Memories of other babies, now so much older, taller and heavier, flood my mind. This could be any of them, so instant is the connection. How familiar the feel of that downy little head, nestled between my jaw and shoulder. How quickly she forgets her anger at the empty bottle as she drifts toward peaceful oblivion. My ears thirstily drink in the sounds she makes, universal newborn squeaks and grunts, uttered as though under great exertion. How I remember the sweet smell of a clean, pampered baby, the soaps, lotions, Downy and Ivory Snow. I marveled at the newborn agility, as she deftly folds those tiny pliable Kermit-legs, tucking them comfortably beneath her body.

My eyes drink in all the details of this so-called miracle, memorizing them as her parents no doubt have done many times over. The changes in even one short week will leave this moment only a memory, so I savor all the delicious morsels of this handiwork of God's creation, languorously, indulgently tonight.

When I at last must return this precious sleeping bundle to her seat, a tide of reluctance washes over me. I gently place her back in her transporter, arranging limbs and clothing to afford her the most comfort. Satisfied and relaxed, both of us, I ponder on the symbiotic nature of human relationships. In meeting the needs of another, one may unknowingly nurture needs of one's own, unaware they ever existed.

So, Grandmas, and you so-called experts, sorry, but I respectfully disagree. Spoil a baby? If it results from holding, cuddling and nurturing, I say, "Go to it! Spoil away! And do it daily, several times. Oh, if you need help, give me a call. I'd be happy to help."

Night

by

Lori L. Wilson

My head won't stop pounding
My heart won't stop bleeding
I can't stop thinking about nothing

Make it all go away
Goodbye light of day
Darkness comes sweetly
Engulfing me neatly

All wrapped up in blackness
Lost in the nothingness of night
Free of imperfections
When wrong becomes right

When you are not yourself
And I am not me
When darkness smothers you up
And you no longer can see

I hate to wake up
And face the day
When it's all black and white
No room for gray

"Look what you did"
"Wrong again"
No "Nice to see you"
Just "Where have you been?"

The light of day
Brings the cold hard factor
Of reality
To even the very best actor

No mask to disguise
The red in your eyes
No play to take away
The reality of day

And closing your eyes
Does not work
Darkness for seconds
But reality still lurks

The only way
To escape the light of day forever
Is to go to sleep
And wake up never

So good night my dear
Have no fear
Nothing can hurt me here

Place the covers over my head
For eternity
And let me sleep in my bed
Of unreality

I shall not awake
It's a permanent sleep
I'm caught in the darkness
I'm in too deep

Remember me not
Yet I'll think of you often
As I sleep restlessly
In my self-made coffin

A Band of Gold

by

David K. Owen

I saw something that you might like,
Although, it is rather small.
There really is not much to it,
From what I recall.

It is a very simple thing,
But to have one could be fun.
It is circular in shape,
And is the color of the sun.

Its shape shows no beginning,
As well as no end,
Which means it is eternal,
And its message is deep within.

So I come before you on my knees,
To give you this tiny thing.
It is nothing more than a band of gold,
Known as a wedding ring.

A Distant Cry

by

Russell P. Dupont

I hear a child cry at night
Clutch his bear and cry with fright.

His parents fight in another room
I hope help is coming soon.

His sister holds him tight to calm his fear
"Just be quiet and it will all disappear."

I hear the crash of a bottle or two
And this evil will seal their doom.

As I fight to be heard and end this war
I wake up to a knock at my door.

I switch on my light, finally I see.
The child in my dream was actually me.

The Family: A Personal Definition

by

Judy Turman

What is a family? A family is a group of people who have bonded — one's biological parents and siblings, one's extended family, including grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins, one's closest circle of friends, co-workers, even one's fellow human beings. Whether bound by ties of blood or affinity, they rear, teach, support, enable, admonish, praise and when necessary, tolerate or even defend one another. Most of all, a family is a group who love each other.

In his poem "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning," John Donne addresses what I think is the central function of the family: providing assurance and stability which give meaning and direction to one another's lives. In this poem a lover addresses the person he must leave behind, urging the other not to mourn their separation, for the love that binds them is so great it transcends barriers of time and space. This realization gives the speaker security; he is "inter-assured of the mind" that the two of them share a "love so much refined that our selves know not what it is . . . " Rather than being destroyed by their parting, their love will expand,not only filling the void, but allowing the lover freedom to roam far from home.

The poem is indeed the picture of the essential role of a family: providing security, direction and freedom to be ourselves by providing love. Donne's immortal concluding lines, "Thy firmness makes my circle just, And makes me end where I begun," affirm that, so long as his loved one remains constant, the speaker's life has order and completeness. She provides a central core of comfort, peace and love which he can not only return to but base his existence on.

Such, as I see it, is still the role of the modern family: whether our ties are biological or emotional, the family is the unit that provides the love that enables us to go as far as we can go to be the best that we can be. Too often, we meet individuals deprived of such love who flounder or give violent expression to their frustration. I think, at the core, a dysfunctional family is one that has failed to provide the safe haven, the confidence-building security of love. Not that simply providing love is any guarantee. Even Jesus lost one of the 12 on whom he poured out his life. Giving love is no absolute guarantee of success, but not giving love is an almost certain guarantee of failure. Infants who are not held or caressed shrivel and die; adults who feel no one cares do much the same thing, if emotionally rather than physically.

Nor is there anything simple about love. Finding the slippery middle ground between coddling and coercing, encouraging and encroaching is often the most difficult task a family member can face. Nevertheless, it is a task we must undertake if the members of our family are to thrive, for by so doing, we show that we love. Families that have it, though assaulted by the stresses of modern life, seem somehow to succeed; those without it usually fail.

Recently, a new member of our faculty suffered through the trauma of her son's receiving third-degree burns in a kitchen grease fire. In thanking the rest of us for the flowers, cards, gifts, and messages of encouragement, for our reaching out in love, she wrote, "I don't think I've ever felt so much a part of a 'family' before. . . ."

Donne had it right: love is the force that gives meaning and direction to our lives. Paul had it right, too: "The greatest of these is love." A family isn't a family without it.

Untitled by Crystal A. Smith

River Everlasting

by

Ijeoma Osuagwu

The river of life outlasts the Nile.
This river flows from generation to generation.
Its waters are crimson.
River everlasting runs through each man.
When our life's journey comes to its end, the river is dry for a moment, shortly followed by the flooding cry of newborn babes.
Let us not contaminate these pacified waters, for when we do, the waters will no longer gently lap the shore but will instead become wraths of violent waves and turbulent seas.

In The Land of Nod

by

Charles L. Lowery

When I was born the world was jungle,
A tangle of time and timber and green.
A river ran — so black and deep;
And in my sleep I was vicious and mean.

My fathers were dark and wolf-like kings,
With wet tongues — hungry and happy when fed.
Their sword-like teeth were sharp and white,
And in the night they would circle my bed.

When I was born the air was much richer,
Much thicker with wealth and wisdom of sod.
We all hunted well the bestial feast,
We in the East — shunned and cursed by God.

I learned the old ways of hunting for meat:
By the sweat of one's face and blood of one's vein.
In the kingdom of Nod all were strong —
By flesh and bone — we children of Cain

Now I Lay Me Down to Toss and Turn

by

Tressie D. Seegers

Have you ever lain awake at night attempting everything possible to turn your brain off? Your body may be completely worn out, but your brain refuses to subscribe to sweet slumber that everyone else in your house and the whole world, it seems, is experiencing. This lack of restful response is a state with which I am too familiar. This sleeplessness seems to occur most often the night before an important day, or one which is going to be stressful and long.

I lie awake, tossing and turning as if my bed were a hard wooden bunk on the Mayflower. Every time I open my eyes, there are luminous green numbers peering at me from the dark screaming, "Stop looking at me and go to sleep already! You are going to be monstrously tired tomorrow!" They pressure me to fall asleep, and I fail horribly.

I have tried counting sheep, but sheep do not make me drowsy. My mind wanders to the beautiful meadow where the sheep run and play, dancing and frolicking, jumping and skipping like children on a playground. "My, that grass looks green," I say to myself. "I wonder what kind of fertilizer they used? Is it time to fertilize my grass? No, I just did that last month. I remember because the dogs got loose and I met my new neighbor. We went to eat Chinese food the next day. Man, I really need to start watching what I eat. That's it! Come Monday I am going on a diet! I wonder if I could lose five pounds by the weekend? Did I return those movies we rented last weekend?"

This runaway train of thought goes on and on, after counting only six sheep in that impossibly green meadow. After many hours of torturous insomnia, I have developed my own technique that most often puts my brain to sleep like a new puppy with a full belly.

I go to a special place inside my mind. When I concentrate on this place, it puts me in a tranquil state that is soon followed by that sacred function — sleep. I block everything out of my mind and see nothing but blackness. Then my tranquillity begins to develop like film in a pan of water in a darkened room.

The scene is so beautiful and peaceful that it can put the most restless and stubborn mind to sleep. A stream softly flows, crystal clear water trickling across thousands of rocks. Some are large, some small, but all are worn as smooth as wet glass. This is not deep water. If a raccoon were to walk across this stream, it would come away with wet feet and little stalactites of wet, pointed fur on its belly. The soft trickle of the stream sounds like a tiny parade of water falling from a spout into a bathtub filled with inviting warmth and comfort.

A huge oak tree on the bank closest to me was a sapling when my grandmother was born. Its massive limbs stretch across both bank and water, offering shade to minnows and grasshoppers alike. Taking advantage of the cool shade, a fawn rests beneath the wise branches, its downy soft fur the color of coffee laden with three heaping teaspoons of cream. The fawn's ears stand straight up and twitch periodically as if they are trying to keep him awake. His eyes dance back and forth under heavy lids while his mother lingers close by.

Standing in the shallow stream, quenching her thirst after grazing on the lush green banks, ever so slowly she walks, as if the earth could give way at any moment beneath her. She steals a periodic glance at her lounging fawn who is unaware of the beauty which surrounds him. Across the way, a turtle sits on a rock, basking in the sun's golden rays. He is watchman over this river, surveying every move the deer makes.

Off in the distance, a beautiful mansion with majestic white pillars speaks of power and grace. Huge as it may be, from where I sit, it seems as if a lion could walk by and crush it in one step with its mighty paw. The sky above is as blue as the nursery walls of a proud couple's first baby boy. Clouds made of fluffy white cotton have been stretched across the sky. They drift like a sailboat on a waveless lake, taking with them the worries that clog my mind, my insignificant problems, and most importantly, my consciousness.

The next time you lie awake at night and sleep will not come, lose yourself inside the most beautiful scene your mind can imagine. Paint the colors as bright as gumballs in a five-cent machine, or as soft as a bouquet of fresh-cut pastel flowers. Lose yourself inside your mind and tranquility will cover your body like a warm blanket, and sleep will soon follow. Sweet dreams!

A Silent Life

by

Jennifer J. Barron

One, Two, Three.
Oh, how I wish to be free.
Sailing in the tender breeze,
Gliding high above the tallest trees,
Escaping from my mind,
Leaving all troubles behind.

My soul cannot escape
This body that I hate.
It is trapped in a place
Full of disgrace,
Entangled in madness,
Overpowered by sadness.

The world is a beautiful place, so I am told
But my eyes will not allow me to see
What beauty it holds.
Darkness covers all light from the sun
Veiling its warmth, I have become numb.

With my insides frozen
And my eyes blinded,
Whatever is out there for me,
I cannot seem to find it.

This is the reason I must escape.
My soul needs to find a freer place
Where I can feel the warmth
Of a setting sun
And capture the beauty of Our God's
gentle love.

One, Two, Three
This bullet has set me free.
But my web I leave behind
Entangling all who love me.
In time, I will set them free
And show them the light
That now follows me.

Generation Gap

by

Kay C. Dawson

You left today,
Driving into your other world,
The one so attractive to you,
The one I cannot enter.

A part of me goes with you,
The part still attached,
The part you would remove
If only you could.

Yours is a world I cannot understand
Even if I wanted to.
It makes no sense to me, this place
That draws you to its land.

What is it exactly which divides us?
It's more than time, really, more than years.
Different gifts, traits, sets of mind
Dominate the present tense.

Genes and cells bind us, blind us
To each other, a natural conflict
That should resolve itself in time.
Today, we can't see past the mix.

Who can say what lies ahead?
A generation yawns between.
The chain that links is strained
Across a valley of pain.

A parent's heart walks in another body
She can no longer hold. The result
Frightens, lightens, heightens her mind.
But, oh, her heart is torn. Be kind.

Simple

by

Robert C. Lee III

That will be easy
There's nothing to it at all
What a piece of cake

Peck

by

Robert C. Lee III

A chip in the paint
Small, flat, blue with red center
Wonder what happened

Dark City by Dan C. Guy

Do We Have More Rights Than Animals?

by

Jennifer S. Sliter

For many years, environmentalists and property owners have been waging an intense battle, a battle that has been fought many times before, a battle over rights. This particular battle is not about civil rights or human rights, but about animal rights and property rights and which should take precedence over the other. The battle between property rights, which should take precedence, and animal rights has an extreme impact on the laws of this country.

Since its founding, the Environmental Protection Agency and other government agencies have become increasingly out of control. In many instances a government agency blocked a person from building a home on their property because a certain type of bird might choose to nest near the building site. A farmer might lose the right to plow a field because a recent flood turned it into a wetland. In other cases, a rancher might not be able to build a pond in his pasture to water the stock. In northern California, the National Marine Fisheries Services has declared a portion of the state "critical habitat" for the Coho salmon. This one act caused over 1,500,000 acres of Siskiyou County to be closed to agriculture, grazing and home or building sites. This causes the land to be virtually worthless.

The animal rights fight is very costly to both the government and the property owner. In San Bernardino County, the Delhi Sands flower-loving fly is the cause of a colossal controversy. Since 1993, these diminutive flies have disrupted traffic and cost County taxpayers over $6 million.

This is taking place all over the United States of America. Many people condone this practice because of the alarming number of animals that become extinct each year. "I think the system is out of control and something needs to be done," said Jerry Eaves, chairman of the San Bernardino County Board of Supervisors. "The Endangered Species Act was intended to save eagles and bears. Personally, I don't think we should be spending this money to save cockroaches, snails and flies."

Property owners must now think twice before they cut down a tree that may be listed as habitat for an endangered species. Now a person can be fined and even jailed for unloading sand at a building site without federal permits. In the Constitution, the country's founders wrote, "Nor shall private property be taken for public use without just compensation." The founders of the United Stated knew from bitter experience that for human beings to be free there must be basic protections that limit the powers of government. They understood the difference between laws based justice and wisdom and those based on politics and special interest struggles.

When did the government of the United States of America forget the very laws that they wrote in the Constitution of the United States of America? The laws were written to protect the rights of citizens. Many people fought and died in wars to protect those rights. When did human beings lose the rights that animals gained?

Freedom of Youth *by Cecilee R.Long*